

Congressional Testimony: Water and Sanitation

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for the
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Mr. Chairman and members of the Committee, I would like to thank you for the opportunity to discuss safe water and sanitation and U.S. foreign assistance.

We are all aware of the devastation wrought by HIV/AIDS on sub-Saharan Africa. However, developing countries in Africa and elsewhere face another severe crisis that demands our help. Three to four million people—using half of the hospital beds in the world—die *each year* from another silent killer: unsafe water. The vast majority of these victims are children, struck down by waterborne typhoid, cholera, diarrhea, and dysentery, and virtually all live in developing countries. Lack of water also impedes the social and economic development of those who survive: women and girls in many parts of sub-Saharan Africa must walk an average of six kilometers to fetch water—*each way*—preventing them from going to school or working outside the home. And millions more are too sick from chronic waterborne illness to attend school at all.

The victims of dirty water need our help. The United States government has an active program, but we can do more, and we can do it better. The “Water for the Poor Act 2005” goes a long way towards this goal. I would like to focus on three key points related to the legislation before the Committee:

1. The United States can enhance its national security by increasing water and sanitation foreign assistance to developing countries. Furthermore, water management offers unique opportunities to build peace between parties in conflict.
2. Integrating water and sanitation programs into other sectors will make water and sanitation programs more effective—and improve the results of programs in other sectors, such as health, agriculture, education, economic development, and conflict prevention.
3. Improving donor coordination and increasing multilateral efforts would make water and sanitation foreign assistance more effective.

1. The United States can enhance its national security by increasing water and sanitation foreign assistance to developing countries. Furthermore, water management offers unique opportunities to build peace between parties in conflict.

Why should the United States increase its foreign assistance to help developing countries improve their access to safe water and sanitation? Simply put, safe water will make us all safer. Without it, neighboring users sometimes come to blows. For example, increasing water scarcity in Kenya pits herder against farmer, and urban dweller against rural peasant. Communities in

China are standing up to industries that pollute water supplies, sometimes leading to violent confrontations between the protesters and local officials. Civil protests, in part sparked by dramatic hikes in water prices, have contributed to the paralysis of successive Bolivian governments.

The connections are clear. Improved water and sanitation are the bedrock of development. A healthy, productive labor force requires safe drinking water, for example, and women's education and empowerment require adequate water sanitation. Development is key to building democracy and ensuring state stability. But while developing countries face this new global crisis that threatens their stability, the donor community is not responding with the aid necessary to avert these threats.

Most of United States' water development aid is given to a handful of countries (Afghanistan, Egypt, Indonesia, Iraq, Jordan, Pakistan, and West Bank/Gaza). Geopolitical interests certainly shape any foreign policy, and no one is naïve enough to suggest ignoring these interests. However, our aid in the water and sanitation sector is nearsighted. Africa's share of USAID water and sanitation assistance, excluding integrated health programs and disaster relief, is only 7 percent. In 2000-2001, only 12 percent of total OECD water sector aid was delivered to countries where less than 60 percent of the population has access to an improved water source. While these statistics predate the \$970-million "Water for the Poor 2003-2005" initiative announced by the administration at the World Summit on Sustainable Development, donors are still doing too little to address the water crisis.

The increasing scarcity and declining quality of water, however, not only threaten U.S. national security, but also offer opportunities. Increasing global leadership in water and sanitation would improve the United States' international stature while helping to alleviate poverty, build democracy, and provide humanitarian assistance. In addition, instead of focusing heavily on the threats posed by water scarcity, the United States could also more actively exploit the *peacemaking* potential of water management. We could leverage opportunities to manage water problems in ways that build confidence, trust, and peace between parties in conflict.

Such a "water peacemaking" strategy could generate dividends beyond water. First, it builds trust and serves as an avenue to talk when parties in conflict are stalemated on other issues. Second, it establishes habits of cooperation among states, some with little experience cooperating, such as in the Kura-Araks basin in the Caucasus or in other states of the former Soviet Union. Third, it forges people-to-people or expert-to-expert relationships, as demonstrated by the "Good Water Makes Good Neighbors" program in the Middle East.¹

Two hundred and sixty-three rivers are shared by two or more countries, providing ample opportunities for states in conflict to share water. Water is frequently used as a lifeline for dialogue and cooperation during conflict. Some examples:

- The Indus Waters Treaty stayed in force despite three major wars between India and Pakistan since its signing in 1960.

¹ For more on Friends of the Earth Middle East and its Good Water Makes Good Neighbors program, see <http://www.foeme.org/>.

- Cambodia, Laos, Vietnam, and Thailand formed the Mekong Committee in 1957 and continued exchanging water data throughout the Southeast Asian wars of the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s.
- From the 1980s until the early 1990s, while both nations were formally at war, water managers for Israel and Jordan held secret “picnic table” talks to arrange sharing the water from the Jordan and Yarmuk rivers.

Despite the warnings of impending “water wars”—especially in the Nile River Basin—research indicates that nations do not go to war over water.^{2,3} Since 1999, the Nile Basin Initiative, facilitated by the UN Development Programme, the World Bank, and the Canadian International Development Agency, and supported in part by USAID, has included all the Nile’s riparians in ministerial-level negotiations to formulate a shared vision for the basin’s sustainable development.⁴ While not explicitly a peacemaking effort, this cooperative program provides vital avenues for dialogue and promises tangible advances in development, thus reducing tensions.

The U.S. government should support and encourage efforts to apply lessons learned from such prominent efforts. In another “basin at risk,” Angola, Namibia, and Botswana want to use the Okavango River in potentially incompatible ways, which could reopen old wounds in this former war zone. Basin-wide institutions such as the Okavango River Commission, however, are actively fostering cooperation to meet the countries’ changing needs and head off conflict. In one of its few multilateral water projects, USAID is supporting this fragile water basin institution as it tries to peaceably meet the region’s water, sanitation, and development needs.

Not only can cooperative water management help prevent conflict, but it can help resolve wars caused by other problems. For example, neither the conflict between Israel and Palestine nor the conflict between India and Pakistan was caused by water scarcity. Nevertheless, water resources are key strategic assets that each party must agree how to share before conflict can end. By dedicating working groups to negotiating water issues, the respective peace processes have explicitly recognized the importance of shared water resources.

Finally, cooperative water management can help countries recover from war and emerge from post-conflict reconstruction safer, healthier, and more stable. As Pekka Haavisto, head of UNEP’s Post-Conflict Assessment Unit, writes in *State of the World 2005*, efforts to restore the transboundary Mesopotamian marshlands have brought Iraqi and Iranian scientists together for the first time in 29 years.⁵ By helping establish water management structures that promote dialogue and cooperation among former combatants, these steps may prevent the reemergence of conflict.

² Wolf, Aaron T., Shira B. Yoffe, & Marc Giordano. (2003). “International waters: Identifying basins at risk.” *Water Policy* 5, 29-60.

³ Wolf, Aaron T., Annika Kramer, Alexander Carius, & Geoffrey D. Dabelko. (2005). “Managing water conflict and cooperation.” In Worldwatch Institute, *State of the world 2005: Redefining global security* (pages 80-95). New York: Norton.

⁴ See the Nile Basin Initiative (NBI) Secretariat’s website at <http://www.nilebasin.org/>.

⁵ Haavisto, Pekka. (2005a). “Environmental impacts of war.” In Worldwatch Institute, *State of the world 2005: Redefining global security* (pages 158-159). New York: Norton.

_____. (2005b). “Green helmets.” *Our Planet* 15(4), 21-22.

But the future of water conflict and cooperation may not look like the past. Soon, for example, Chinese plans for eight hydropower dams on the headwaters of the Mekong River may have dramatic implications for the countries downstream—Burma, Thailand, Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam—if, as some predict, these dams will disrupt rice cultivation and the river’s rich fisheries.

2. Integrating water and sanitation programs into other sectors will make water and sanitation programs more effective—and improve the results of programs in other sectors, such as health, agriculture, education, economic development, and conflict prevention.

Both donor and recipients face the challenges posed by sectoral and departmental stovepipes that fail to recognize water’s fundamental role in development. Although research on the economic benefits of improved water and sanitation is somewhat limited, the WHO estimates that the \$11.3 billion annual investment needed to meet the drinking water and sanitation targets in the MDGs would return \$84 billion each year, and save health agencies \$7 billion in health care costs and individuals \$340 million.⁶ School attendance would jump by an extra 272 million days a year, and children under 5 would gain 1.5 billion healthy days. A WaterAID study of the impacts of improved water and sanitation in Madagascar found that the water projects had reduced child illness and infant mortality rates.⁷ The time saved from fewer long walks to gather water left children more time to study. Offering water in the schools led to improved sanitation and hygiene. New community-based organizations emerged from water user associations, thus illustrating how water management can help build democratic institutions.

Developing countries must move from recognizing the link between water and development to adopting integrated steps to improve water and sanitation at the national and local levels. More government agencies—beyond the ministries of water or environment—should incorporate water’s benefits for the ecosystem, economy, agriculture, health, education, and security into their budgets and policies. The Water for the Poor Act 2005 could be a critical step towards this goal: the U.S. government should seek to obtain visible and vocal support from developing-country leaders for integrating efforts and increasing public “on-budget” funding for water and sanitation. These on-budget resources should not be limited strictly to water, environment, or development ministries, but extend to finance, health, education, agriculture, and infrastructure ministries. External funding, whether from bilateral donors, international organizations, or NGOs, will inevitably rise and fall over time. But the support under discussion should help generate additional on-budget resources for water and sanitation from recipient governments.

And what we ask of developing countries, we need to do ourselves. Collaborations across bureaus and offices would capitalize on key links to a wide range of development goals. The new USAID Office of Conflict Management and Mitigation, for example, is a cross-cutting department that examines water and conflict across the world, as described in its forthcoming Water and Conflict Toolkit. To support the objectives of the Water for the Poor Act 2005, the

⁶ World Health Organization. (2004). *Evaluation of the costs and benefits of water and sanitation improvements at the global level*. Geneva: World Health Organization.

⁷ See http://www.wateraid.org/what_we_do/where_we_work/6301.asp

Committee should add funding for training the next generation of water managers. Many U.S. universities and institutes are well-positioned to arm Americans and international managers alike with skill sets that go beyond engineering and hydrology to include development and agricultural economics, law, ecology, public health, urban planning, and foreign and security policy. This support for interdisciplinary training will, in the long run, help overcome the stovepiping that plagues many water and sanitation efforts on the ground and within donor agencies today.⁸

3. Improving donor coordination and increasing multilateral efforts would make water and sanitation foreign assistance more effective.

Water is naturally multilateral: it pays no respect to national boundaries. This poses a challenge for donors used to looking at problems from a bilateral, not regional or purely local, perspective. As the Committee considers the Water for the Poor Act 2005, it should recognize the challenges that arise from donor dollars flowing to national governments, while water supply and sanitation are typically managed and funded at local levels.

This state-to-state funding path also constrains most donors from taking regional approaches, which could address larger water problems across ecosystems. The United States should build on its regional efforts, as well as work more often with multilateral institutions to escape the bilateral constraints of USAID. In addition, a multilateral approach could help the United States operate in regions where it is constrained by its perceived alliances with one country or group.

The United States is not alone in its interest in expanding water programs. The portfolios of at least 20 UN entities include water. The World Bank, the Global Environmental Facility, and the British, Canadian, Dutch, German, Japanese, and Swedish aid agencies have made integrated water programs a key priority. The Water for Poor Act calls for USAID to review its own programs and derive lessons from its efforts. However, the review could be even more productive if it also included a selection of water and sanitation programs from leading international organizations, bilateral donors, and overseas NGOs.

This crowded field produces a dizzying array of programs and policies, which can undercut each other. Coordinating donor efforts could reduce the burden on already-taxed aid recipients, who complain that some donors give them insufficient funds, set unrealistically short time frames, change priorities midstream, require burdensome reporting, establish competing programs, impose inappropriate models, and are unwilling to collaborate. Through regular, high-profile forums, the U.S. government should continue to encourage coordination and increased funding for water and sanitation. While a “Global Fund for Water” modeled on the Global Fund for HIV/AIDS, TB, and Malaria may not be a politically viable or efficient alternative, there is still dramatic room for improving coordination among international organizations and bilateral donors.

Conclusion

Every eight hours more people die from waterborne disease than were killed in the September 11th attacks. Of course clean water will not directly prevent terrorism, but reducing human

⁸ See, for example, programs such as those at Oregon State University <http://www.transboundarywaters.orst.edu/> and the Universities Partnership for Transboundary Waters <http://waterpartners.geo.orst.edu/>.

suffering, encouraging development, and building goodwill increases our security by reducing poverty and underlying grievances around the world, including in key countries and communities of strategic concern to the United States. As stated in the 2002 National Security Strategy, “Poverty does not make poor people into terrorists and murderers. Yet poverty, weak institutions, and corruption can make weak states vulnerable to terrorist networks and drug cartels within their borders.” Poor water and sanitation are key causes of this destabilizing poverty, and addressing these poor living conditions can be central to improving broad-based U.S. national security.

Note

I am a federal employee at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, the official memorial to the nation’s 28th president housed within the Smithsonian Institution. I am testifying in my own personal capacity and my comments do not reflect the views of the Woodrow Wilson Center. In the interest of full disclosure, I would like to note that for the past five years, the Wilson Center's Environmental Change and Security Program has also received funding from the U.S. Agency for International Development in the amount of \$500,000 - \$625,000 per fiscal year for activities on population dynamics, environment, and foreign policy. Funding for the Environmental Change and Security Program’s Navigating Peace Initiative on water has been provided by the Carnegie Corporation of New York. For more information, please visit www.wilsoncenter.org/ecsp